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# *Desperately Seeking 'the Merina' (Central Madagascar): Reading Ethnonyms and their Semantic Fields in African Identity Histories<sup>1</sup>*

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*This article is an exploration into what a temporally and semantically 'deep' reading of African identity names reveals not only about the shifting meanings of ethnic naming over time but about the nature and definition of ethnic identity itself. Scholars have long recognized that identities are socially and historically constructed yet failed to sufficiently account for continuing shifts and transformations of identity consciousness within named corporate groups. Taking the case of the Merina of central Madagascar this article demonstrates that Merina identity is both an historical product of the early nineteenth century and that that identity was, at origin, a political consciousness that later became ethnicized. These conclusions are reached through a careful reading of the meanings of vernacular identity names in Malagasy language texts. By drawing comparisons between Merina and Zulu identities of the early nineteenth century, the article suggests that precolonial 'ethnic' identities generated through the process of state formation followed a common trajectory from political to ethnic. It further argues that care should be exercised in terming named corporate groups 'ethnic' when the consciousness that binds them together may be of an altogether different nature. Finally, the article argues that studies of ethnogenesis and ethnic identity transformation must be extended into Africa's precolonial past and greater attention paid to the agency of Africans in identity politics. Careful 'readings' of African names of belonging will play a pivotal role in these projects.*

## **Introduction**

'The answer will have to come out of a historical inquiry'.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last 15 years scholars of Africa have become increasingly sensitive to histories and constructions of African identities. The new scholarship, much of which has been formulated

1 Abbreviations employed in this article: LMS/M/IL/10/3/2 = Archives of the London Missionary Society, School of Oriental and African Studies (London), Madagascar, Incoming Letters, Box 10, Folder 3, Jacket 2. LMS/J/M&M/1 = LMS archives, Journals, Madagascar and Mauritius, Box 1. NMS/S/HA/132/9 = Archives of the Norwegian Missionary Society, held at the Misjonshøgskolen (Stavanger, Norway), Hjemme Arkiv, Boks 132, Legg 9. MNA/HB/10 = Mauritius National Archives (Coromandel, Mauritius), Series HB, Document 10 (references with any succeeding numbers refer to pages and folios). ADC/FD/102/114v = Archives Départementales de Caen (Caen, France), Fonds Decaen, Volume 102, folio 114v. BL/MD/Add.Mss./18123/34r = British Library (London), Manuscripts Division, Additional Manuscript Number 18123, folio 34r. *Tantara* = F. Callet (ed), *Tantara ny Andriana eto Madagascar: Documents historiques d'après les manuscrits malgaches* Deuxième Edition (Antananarivo, 1981) [originally published in successive volumes during the 1870s].

2 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* Translated from the French by Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), p. 72.

by scholars of ethnicity working on the southern half of the continent, owes a fundamental intellectual debt to the work of Frederick Barth. In his book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) Barth conceptualized ethnic identity as a relational phenomenon. He challenged a long-held notion, 'the simplistic view', as he put it, 'that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity'.<sup>3</sup> For Barth it was precisely the heightened intercommunication and interaction of corporate social groups in the modern world – not their detachment – that reinforced a sense of ethnic distinctiveness.

Second, and closely related to his first point, Barth suggested scholars of ethnic identity adopt 'a generative viewpoint', one that would problematize 'different processes that seem to be involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups'.<sup>4</sup> He opposed the common 'objective' definitions of ethnic groups in the anthropological literature claiming that such definitions begged 'all the critical questions' and implied 'a preconceived view of what are the significant factors in the genesis, structure, and function of such groups'.<sup>5</sup> Processual, 'subjective' studies would differ from 'objective' ones by seeking to determine the ethnic views of the research subjects themselves rather than ascribing ethnicity through the use of evaluative criteria dispassionately formulated in the academy.

Few scholars would dispute the salutary direction in which Barth steered the study of social identity. From a variety of disciplines and fields scholars now routinely employ processual, historical, relational models for understanding ethnicity and other forms of social identity. The analytical focus and direction that Barth imparted to a field eager to travel new paths continues to inform contemporary study, especially in Africa. Africanists who would not abandon research on ethnicity during the years of its extreme unpopularity as a subject of academic inquiry in newly independent Africa<sup>6</sup> drew significantly from Barth's method.<sup>7</sup> When in the early 1980s African ethnic studies re-emerged with a flourish they did so in a metamorphosed albeit substantially uniform mould. The 'creation of tribalism school', as I term theoretically and methodologically related studies published after 1975, rested squarely upon analytical principles articulated by Barth.<sup>8</sup>

Dominant into the 1990s, the creation of tribalism paradigm identified colonial naming and administrative–judicial practices as largely responsible for African ethnicity. The studies were decidedly historical and processual in the new tradition and in explicit

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3 F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Bergen and Oslo, 1969), p. 9.

4 Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, p. 10.

5 Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, p. 11.

6 E. Osaghae summarizes this period and its impact on African ethnic studies in his article entitled 'Redeeming the Utility of the Ethnic Perspective in African Studies: Towards a New Agenda', *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 18,2 (1990), pp. 37–58.

7 R. Cohen and J. Middleton (eds), *From Tribe to Nation in Africa* (Scranton, 1970); L. Kuper and M.G. Smith (eds), *Pluralism in Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971); R. Bates, *Ethnicity in Contemporary Africa* (Syracuse, 1973); A. Cohen (ed), *Urban Ethnicity* (London, 1974); C. Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, 1976); A.L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity* (Chicago, 1978). These works were also significantly influenced by earlier work on Africa, notably A.L. Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community* (Manchester, 1958); J.C. Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance: Aspects of Social Relationships among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester, 1956); and J.C. Mitchell, *Tribalism and the Plural Society* (London, 1960).

8 The studies that I categorize under this heading – as is true of works comprising any paradigm – are not uniform in perspective or methodology. Influential articulations of 'creation of tribalism' include J. Iliffe, 'The Creation of Tribes' in John Iliffe (ed), *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 318–341; T. Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 211–262; M. Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, 1985); and L. Vail (ed), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989). For Madagascar see M. Esoavelomandroso, 'Une arme de domination: le 'tribalisme' à Madagascar (XIX<sup>e</sup> – milieu du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle)' in J.-P. Chrétien (ed), *Les ethnies ont une histoire* (Paris, 1989), pp. 259–266.

opposition to earlier concepts of a static and primordial tribalism.<sup>9</sup> They were notably macro-ethnic or poly-ethnic in scope, adopting the Barthian tradition of examining ethnic groups in relation to each other or – in many cases – in relation to the colonial state.<sup>10</sup> Conceptually and spatially the analytical focus centered upon external ethnic boundaries: the waning, waxing and transformation of significant ethno-cultural markers.<sup>11</sup> The studies analyzed the role of human agents in the process of ethnic generation, usually identifying Europeans (administrators, lawyers, missionaries, settlers, 'the state') and African elites (chiefs, older men, pastors, catechists) as those most actively involved in the process.<sup>12</sup> Agents, process, history, inter-ethnic relationships, administrative ascription – all were Barthian hallmarks of the creation of tribalism paradigm.

The creation of tribalism paradigm tremendously enriched our understanding of ethnic identity in African history. Today, for example, the historical construction and transformation of identity is such a commonly asserted principle that one commentator recently termed it a 'banality' of Africanist scholarship.<sup>13</sup> Yet despite the optimism of another reviewer in 1986 that 'few major additions ... are likely in the near future'<sup>14</sup> there are some notable limits to the creation of tribalism paradigm. Prominent among them is the tendency to draw historical baselines in the late nineteenth century and to assume, implicitly or explicitly, that ethnicity is primarily a phenomenon of the colonial and post-colonial eras.<sup>15</sup>

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- 9 For explicit statements of these principles see A. Mafeje, 'The Ideology of Tribalism', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 9,2 (1971), pp. 253–261; C. Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda* (New York, 1988); J.-P. Chrétien (ed), *Les ethnies ont une histoire* (Paris, 1989).
- 10 Cohen, *Urban Ethnicity*; Iliffe, 'The Creation of Tribes'; K. Ingham, *Politics in Modern Africa: The Uneven Tribal Dimension* (London, 1990); L. Sklar, 'The Contribution of Tribalism to Nationalism in Western Nigeria' in R. Melson and H. Wolpe (eds), *Nigeria: Modernization and the Politics of Comunalism* (East Lansing, 1971), pp. 514–529; M.C. Newbury, 'Colonialism, Ethnicity, and Rural Political Protest: Rwanda and Zanzibar in Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Politics*, 15,3 (1983), pp. 253–280; J.-L. Amselle and E. M' Bokolo (eds), *Au coeur de l'ethnie: ethnies, tribalisme et état en Afrique* (Paris, 1985); as well as most of the works cited in previous and following footnotes. For a recent restatement of the 'inter-ethnic' approach see J.C. Mitchell, 'Chapter 6: The Perception of Regionalism and Ethnicity' in J.C. Mitchell, *Cities, Society, and Social Perception: A Central African Perspective* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 180–242.
- 11 J.-L. Amselle, *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris, 1990); E.H. Andretta, 'Symbolic Continuity, Material Discontinuity, and Ethnic Identity Among Murle Communities in the Southern Sudan', *Ethnology*, 28,1 (1989), pp. 17–31; P. Brandström, *Who is a Sukuma and Who is a Nyamwezi: Ethnic Identity in West-Central Tanzania* (Uppsala, 1986); J.T. Gallagher, 'The Emergence of an African Ethnic Group: The Case of the Ndendeuili', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 7,1 (1974), pp. 1–26; P. Harries, 'Exclusion, Classification and Internal Colonialism: The Emergence of Ethnicity Among Tsonga-Speakers of South Africa' in L. Vail (ed), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, pp. 82–117; M. Kenny, 'The Dorobo as an Image of the Other', *Africa*, (1981), pp. 477–495; D. Nurse and T. Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society* (Philadelphia, 1985); T. Spear and R. Waller (eds), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (London, 1993).
- 12 Research on ethnicity in Zimbabwe is particularly illustrative of the tendency to privilege European and African elites: T.O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, 1985); T. Ranger, 'Missionaries, Migrants and the Manyika: The Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in L. Vail (ed), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, pp. 118–150; and H. Chimhundu, 'Early Missionaries and the Ethnolinguistic Factor During the "Invention of Tribalism" in Zimbabwe', *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992), pp. 87–109. See also P. Harries, 'The Roots of Ethnicity: Discourse and the Politics of Language Construction in South-East Africa', *African Affairs*, 87,346 (1988), pp. 25–52; and Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order*.
- 13 A. Mbembe, oral discussant comments, 'People Wealth and Power I: West Africa,' scholarly panel at the 37th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association of the United States, Toronto, Canada, 5 November 1994.
- 14 C. Young, 'Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Class in Africa', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 26,3 (1986), p. 453. Young has more recently revised this statement by questioning 'the sunny hues of optimism' pervading his earlier work. See C. Young, 'The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism: Concept and Reality', in C. Young (ed), *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* (Madison, 1993), p. 4.
- 15 Witness the following statement of C. Young in his magisterial study of ethnicity and cultural pluralism in non-Western societies: 'At the point where the third world stood poised on the brink of subjugation to European empires, cultural identities had, with some exceptions, not become strongly affirmed. For the great majority of the rural population, only the local community commanded active membership and loyalty.' C. Young, *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison, 1976), p. 33.

While the novel intellectual and material contexts of the twentieth century certainly produced unique circumstances in which social identity was negotiated, identities themselves – whether gender or ethnic, individual or corporate – are as old as human society itself.<sup>16</sup> The eighteenth and nineteenth century antecedents of twentieth century ethnicity, however, have been largely ignored by this school.

Second, the focus on Europeans and elite African ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ as the prime movers in the manipulation and transformation of ethnic identity conceals both the active role that less politically and economically prominent people play in the making of their own social identities and the resilience of indigenous identities to European interference. Indeed creation of tribalism models often obscure the multiple entrepreneurs who participate in forming and reshaping ethnic identities at the local level on a daily basis. Finally, although ready to acknowledge that identity is historically constructed, scholars still face the challenge of identifying the various mechanisms and processes of identity change and in elucidating the experiences and relevances of identities to specific individuals. Once we learn that ‘the Zulu’ and ‘the Swahili’ are historically constructed identities, we begin to question what it means to be ‘Zulu’ and ‘Swahili’ in the first place.

By excavating the semantic fields of ethnonyms and toponyms<sup>17</sup> in central Madagascar, this article seeks to build upon the strengths of existing scholarship by suggesting new ideas and approaches for executing historical studies of African identities in transformation. The case explored here is the transformation of a corporate identity named ‘Merina’ claimed by the people of highland central Madagascar from the early nineteenth century. Central Madagascar, commonly known as Imerina, is perched on the rolling hills of the Malagasy highlands.<sup>18</sup> Today the Merina number some three million. During the period considered here the population of highland Madagascar probably did not surpass one half million.<sup>19</sup> Living in several micro-kingdoms during the eighteenth century, the people of highland Madagascar were drawn together into a single polity under founder-king Andrianampoinimerina (ruled *ca.* 1783–1810).<sup>20</sup> Commonly called the ‘Merina Kingdom’, the new state was ruled by Andrianampoinimerina and his sovereign successors until 1895, when their British allies abandoned them and the French promptly invaded Madagascar with colonial troops.

The Merina kingdom shared many characteristics of Southern African kingdoms of the nineteenth century, including expansion and incorporation of new societies, diplomatic and military alliances with Britain as a sort of secondary empire, and the struggles of elites to retain power in an increasingly pluralistic and interested political environment in which opponents sought both domestic and foreign allies. The career and political strategies of King Radama I, who ruled through the institution of a standing army from 1810 until his

16 This is an important assumption that I cannot substantiate in depth here. For the last millennium, however, a look at P. Curtin’s discussion of trade diasporas in his *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984) provides several important examples of the rise and fall of ethnic identities in Africa and elsewhere.

17 Toponym has two meanings: (1) a place name, and (2) a name derived from a place name. It is the former definition that is meant throughout this article.

18 Throughout this article I employ the following terms interchangeably: the highlands, the central highlands, highland Madagascar, Imerina, central Madagascar.

19 P. Larson, ‘Interpreting Pre-Colonial Indigenous Censuses in Central Madagascar: The Merina Kingdom and its Population during the mid-Nineteenth Century’ article manuscript in possession of the author (forthcoming).

20 J. Valette, ‘Pour une histoire du règne d’Andrianampoinimerina (1787–1810)’, *Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer*, 52,2 (1965), No. 187, pp. 277–285; H. Deschamps, ‘Andrianampoinimerina, ou la raison d’état au service de l’unité malgache’ in C.-A. Julien (ed), *Les Africains*, Tome II (Paris, 1977), pp. 77–97; H. Deschamps, ‘Tradition and Change in Madagascar, 1790–1870’, in J.E. Flint (ed), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. 5 (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 393–417; G. Berg, ‘Sacred Acquisition: Andrianampoinimerina at Ambohimanga, 1777–1790’, *Journal of African History*, 29,2 (1988), pp. 191–211.

death in 1828, in many ways parallel those of Shaka Zulu.<sup>21</sup> I write elsewhere about how Merina identity history was fundamentally linked to the expansion of Andrianampoinimerina's kingdom and to the actions of peasants and kings in the context of social crisis during the export slave trade from central Madagascar (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries).<sup>22</sup> This article demonstrates the importance of attentive vernacular readings of semantic evidence in such a project.

Like other corporate identities Merina ethnic identity was historically constructed, yet the very words employed to name and categorize that identity, read uncritically, mystify and obscure the process of ethnogenesis rather than clarify it. Identity names such as ethnonyms possess phenomenal power – inherent in their nature as single-word signifiers of complex and heterogeneous significations – to mask both the multidimensionality and the very nature of the identities they denote. The methodological and theoretical questions raised by names of identity cut to the core of ethnic studies: what is an ethnonym and when does a named corporate identity become an ethnic one? These simple questions are deceptively intricate and seldom carefully solved. Named identities such as Zulu, Merina, Ndebele or Nguni often float – or are purposely floated by interested individuals and groups – in the nether world among political, social, ethnic, religious, clan, or national sentiments to achieve strategic purposes. Yet while the historical construction of identity is seldom disputed by today's Africanists, the semantic work required to accurately situate the 'identity space' and 'identity meaning' of corporate names is rarely conducted with the same care as detailing, say, the circumstances that produced 'tribes'.<sup>23</sup>

Ethnonyms are fundamental semantic tools that serve as cultural markers to delineate the boundaries of collective ethnic identities. Yet ethnonyms, single words, maintain a loose, problematic, and poorly explored relationship to the cultural 'stuff,' the identities, that they signify.<sup>24</sup> Ethnonyms are contemporary names signifying 'ethnic' groups that almost inevitably project that ethnicity into the past and suggest reifications of it. Reifications of ethnic identity commonly tend to operate in two dimensions: in space and in time. Spatially a single ethnonym suggests that all individuals claiming it inhabit the same 'identity space', that they experience the identity and understand it in an equivalent way. Recent work on ethnicity, particularly gendered and individual experiences and expressions of it, have demonstrated the possibility of multiple 'spaces' and 'positions' within a single named ethnic identity.<sup>25</sup> Less acknowledged is the problem of transformation

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21 For general histories of the Merina kingdom during the nineteenth century see M. Brown, *Madagascar Rediscovered: A History from Early Times to Independence* (Hamden, 1979); P. Mutibwa, *The Malagasy and the Europeans: Madagascar's Foreign Relations, 1861–1895* (Atlantic Highlands, 1974); and M. Prou, *Malagasy 'Un Pas de plus': Vers l'histoire du 'Royaume de Madagascar' au XIXe siècle*, Tome I, (Paris, 1987).

22 These are themes developed in my forthcoming book entitled *Identities of a Crisis: The Slave Trade, Gender and the Origins of Merina Ethnicity in Highland Central Madagascar, 1770–1822* and in my doctoral dissertation, *Making Ethnic Tradition in a Pre-Colonial Society: Culture, Gender, and Protest in the Early Merina Kingdom, 1750–1822* (PhD Dissertation, Department of History, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1992; University Microfilms Number AAC-9238559).

23 A notable exception is J. Wright, 'Politics, Ideology, and the Invention of the "Nguni"' in T. Lodge (ed), *Resistance and Ideology in Settler Societies* (Johannesburg 1986), pp. 96–118.

24 A problem raised by Barth in his introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, p. 14.

25 P.T. Reid *et al.*, 'Gender and Ethnicity: Perspectives on Dual Status', *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 22,7–8 (1990), pp. 397–408; V. Sapiro, 'Engendering Cultural Differences', in C. Young (ed), *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*, pp. 36–54; J. Willis, 'The Makings of a Tribe: Bondei Identities and Histories', *Journal of African History*, 33,2 (1992), pp. 191–208; D. Klumpp and C. Kratz, 'Aesthetics, Expertise, & Ethnicity', in T. Spear and R. Waller (eds), *Being Maasai*, pp. 195–221; L. Fair, 'Masks of Identity: Dress, Dance and Ethnicity in Zanzibar', Paper delivered at the 37th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association of the United States, Toronto, Canada, 4 November 1994.

of named identities through time. Africanists have tended to pay greater attention to ethnogenesis than to subsequent transformations of once constructed identities.

Temporally, ethnonyms tend to become convenient words for denoting groups of people who today claim a common ethnic identity but who in the past did not, or to today name an identity as ethnic when in the past it was not. Situated at the interface between intricate identities and the individuals who live and think them, ethnonyms not surprisingly emerge as terrains of identity conflict, of naming and renaming. Ethnonyms are often partially accepted or imposed, claimed by groups while refused by their neighbours or imposed from the outside and rejected, resisted or ignored by those so labelled. This article is an exploration into what a temporally and semantically 'deep' reading of Malagasy ethnonyms and toponyms reveals not only about the shifting meanings of 'ethnic' naming over time but about the nature and definition of ethnic identity itself. In the conclusions I suggest some rethinkings of Zulu identity during the early nineteenth century to illustrate the wider comparative relevance of the ideas here proposed.

### **The Historical Problem of Merina Identity**

In an obscure footnote to their famed *Ethnographie de Madagascar* (1908) Alfred and Guillaume Grandidier identified a consequential problem in the culture history of highland Madagascar that both they and their scholarly successors subsequently forgot. In a section of the monograph introducing readers to an ethnography of 'The Merina or Ambaniandro' the authors inserted a lengthy footnote that occupies some three-quarters of the entire page. Buried deep within that footnote the Grandidiers note the following about the term 'Merina':

It is actually not until the beginning of the twentieth century that this term was generally adopted, even in the centre of Madagascar, because Mayeur, who went there in 1777 and 1785, does not mention it. It is Sylvain Roux who, the first, speaks of 'Ymerne' in a letter dated 1808 (colonial archives); in a manuscript of 1816 (colonial archives) it is spelled 'Hémirne' and it appears for the first time on a map in 1819 (*A Chart of Madagascar*, by Lislet-Geoffroy).<sup>26</sup>

This peripheralized passage raises several propositions and problems concerning identity history in central Madagascar. First of all, the authors submit that the Merina ethnonym did not come into general use until the early twentieth century, the years following colonial conquest. (The wording of their statement suggests that the ethnonym may date to an earlier period but was not generally taken up until after 1900.) Second, without substantiation they link Merina (an ethnonym) to Imerina (a toponym, here spelled Ymerne, Hémirne), hardly distinguishing between them. Third, they propose that the first references to Imerina, produced under varying orthographies, appear during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Fourth, the Grandidiers fail to explain the century of identity history between the first articulations of Imerina (toponym) in 1819 and the acceptance of Merina (ethnonym) after 1900. Finally, the Grandidier's two-sentence ethnic minihistory is based upon an unsystematic collection of documents produced by European visitors to the island.

Weakly documented and uncritically argued though it may have been, the Grandidier's minihistory was, in sequence though not in absolute chronology, substantially correct. It was likewise long forgotten – if indeed ever seriously noted. Like highland Malagasy themselves, contemporary scholars of Madagascar routinely project Merina ethnic identity

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26 A. and G. Grandidier, *Histoire Physique, Naturelle et Politique de Madagascar. Volume IV: Ethnographie de Madagascar, Tome Premier: Les Habitants de Madagascar* (Paris, 1908), p. 231, n. 3, French text.

far into the island's highland past.<sup>27</sup> The error is unremarkable. The most common temporal reification of ethnicity remains the assumption that novel, contemporary ethnic identities and ethnic groups have actually existed for much longer than they in fact have. Histories produced for and within imagined communities usually seek legitimacy in the claim of historical permanence. The Merina are no exception, speaking their ethnic identity, as they do today, through stone tombs and mortuary rituals that symbolically contrast an enduring (ethnic, cultural) stability with the lived impermanences of everyday life.<sup>28</sup> That highland Malagasy passed their ideology of ethnic longevity to contemporary scholars is a testament to the historical power of Merina identity and to the persuasiveness of its associated rituals and symbolic productions.

Yet as the Grandidiens record in their footnote, Merina ethnic identity was a collective consciousness of recent origin. Europeans resident in central Madagascar, it is true, did not routinely employ the term Merina until the turn of the twentieth century. On the other hand, highland Malagasy began to call themselves Merina nearly a century earlier and the toponym Imerina is of demonstrably greater antiquity than the early nineteenth century to which the Grandidier's attributed its origin. Imerina appears to be related to the term 'erinerina', glossed 'something occupying a conspicuous place, prominency, conspicuousness'.<sup>29</sup> Although the area today denoted Imerina is indeed situated in Madagascar's centrally elevated highlands, the meaning of the term is probably figurative in origin rather than literal. The political and conceptual geography of central Madagascar equates power and social status with physically elevated position; thus highland royal narratives, the famed *Tantaran'ny Andriana* (hereafter *Tantara*), mythically link the origin of the term Imerina to the conquest of aboriginal inhabitants (Vazimba) living on hills in central Madagascar by newly arriving immigrants (Hova).

The *Tantara* attribute the first use of the term Imerina to King Ralambo – renowned in Merina historical mythology – who ruled in the area of Ambohidrabiby (Avaradrano region) in times long past:

He founded Imerina. He acquired all the smaller hills; for the Vazimba went off from Andriamanelo, and the places that the Vazimba lived were replaced by the Hova seeking habitations, and the people lived up high from then on: at Angavoatsinanana, to Ambohitsitakatra in the north, to Andringitra in the northwest, to Ambohimanoa in the west, to Ankaratra in the south, they were all his, lived at by his ancestors and his kin. 'I will call this Imerina beneath the day', said Ralambo. 'And the reason I am calling it Imerina: I have acquired all the mountains, there is no place that I have not acquired here beneath the day.' There was no high place up here that he did not acquire; the high places are conspicuous (*mierinerina*) from which can be seen all the low places. That is why he called his kingdom/land 'Imerina beneath the day': it could be seen from a distance, exposed, occupying a conspicuous place (*mierinerina*) among all the hills, with the sun above. The low places were all forested; even in the high

27 Some of the many examples: R. Kent, *Early Kingdoms in Madagascar* (New York, 1970), p. 206; H. Deschamps, 'Tradition and Change in Madagascar', p. 395; H. Deschamps, 'Andrianampoinimerina, ou la raison d'état au service de l'unité malgache', p. 79; E. Ralaimihoatra, *Histoire de Madagascar*, 3rd edn (Tananarive, 1969), pp. 92–93; M. Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986), especially pp. 13, 105–112; M. Bloch, 'The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar: the Dissolution of Death, Birth and Fertility into Authority', in M. Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London, 1989), p. 190; F. Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au XIXe siècle: invention d'une identité chrétienne et construction de l'état* (Paris, 1991), p. 34; G. Campbell, 'The Structure of Trade in Madagascar, 1750–1810', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26, 1 (1993), pp. 124, 125, 132, 138, 139, 144–146; and G. Berg, 'Sacred Acquisition', pp. 191, 193, 194, 202.

28 See especially the work of anthropologist M. Bloch. Although Bloch does not explicitly interpret Merina mortuary ritual as a site for the enactment of ethnic identity, these rituals have always functioned in this light and been understood as quintessential features of the Merina as an ethnic group (which is, of course, why Bloch chose to highlight them in his ethnographies). M. Bloch, *Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages, and Kinship Organization in Madagascar* (London, 1971); M. Bloch, 'From Cognition to Ideology', in M. Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London, 1989).

29 J. Richardson, *A New Malagasy-English Dictionary* (Antananarivo, 1885), entry for 'erinerina', p. 139.

places there was some forest but people henceforth lived in the high places. The high places were all swept away [from the Vazimba by the new Hova inhabitants], and that is why they were called 'beneath the day'.<sup>30</sup>

Scholars have attempted to date the reign of King Ralambo to at least the sixteenth century,<sup>31</sup> but such exercises are illusory not only because dating is arbitrarily and problematically assumed from genealogical depth but because kinglists themselves – and whether indeed Ralambo ever existed as an historical figure – must be carefully questioned.<sup>32</sup> An alternative way to conceptualize the origins of the term Imerina is to postulate that by attributing it to the practices of the mythical King Ralambo, the *Tantara* locate the origin of the toponym so far in the highland past as to place it beyond history, thereby reproducing the popular view of the permanence and endurance of such names.

If we proceed in a more empirical manner, we find that the toponym Imerina was first employed to designate a specific and restricted geographical region in the central highlands of Madagascar. The earliest independently documented use of Imerina-as-toponym, contrary to the assertion of the Grandidières, derives from a manuscript produced during the last third of the eighteenth century (and spelled 'Himaire') rather than from a letter of Sylvain Roux written a century and a half later (in 1808). In 1667 a merchant dispatched inland from the coastal French colony at Fort Dauphin was informed by Malagasy in the hinterland region of today's Bara people that the areas of 'Houissanghombe, Himaire and Entamane', further north into the highlands, were rich in cattle.<sup>33</sup> The next reliably documented use of the word Imerina (as far as this author could ascertain) comes from a manuscript prepared from the testimony of the French trader Lebel who visited king Andrianampoinimerina in Antananarivo in 1800 and employed the orthography 'emir' to refer to the region over which he reigned.<sup>34</sup> After the turn of the nineteenth century, Imerina can be found employed in numerous documents relating to central Madagascar.

30 *Tantara*, p. 147. Literal translations from *Tantara* Malagasy into English are virtually impossible. Malgachisants will notice that I have slightly paraphrased in places.

31 For example, to 'vers 1570' in G. Grandidier, *Histoire politique et coloniale, tome Premier, De la découverte de Madagascar à la fin du règne de Ranavalona Ire* (1861) Vol. 5 of A. and G. Grandidier, *Histoire Physique, Naturelle et Politique de Madagascar* (Paris, 1942), p. 47; or 'fin XV<sup>e</sup> – début XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle' in F. Raison-Jourde, 'Le travail et l'échange dans les discours d'Andrianampoinimerina (Madagascar – XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)' in Michel Cartier (ed) *Le travail et ses représentations* (Paris, 1984), p. 228.

32 For problems inherent in Merina kinglists see G. Berg, 'The Myth of Racial Strife and Merina Kinglists: The Transformation of Texts', *History in Africa*, 4 (1972), pp. 1–30.

33 Le Case, in G. and A. Grandidier, *Collection des ouvrages anciens concernant Madagascar* (Paris), IX, pp. 576–577. A. Delivré suggests these three names are 'Vohitsanombo, Imerina and Antimamo' respectively: A. Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina: interprétation d'une tradition orale* (Paris, 1974), p. 341, n. 4. While the name Vohitsanombo was often employed by Europeans to refer to a region in the inland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the area has never been identified adequately and remains obscure. It would seem reasonable, on the other hand, to take the names 'Himaire' and 'Entamane' to refer to Imerina and Antaimamo (Imamo) because of the resemblance of the names of these two regions of central Madagascar (Imamo, once an independent kingdom, is now part of western Imerina). An anomaly appears, however, in Le Case's assertion that these regions were both rich in cattle. While this might well have been the case for Imamo, which is much less densely populated than the central part of Imerina, other reports referring to the area around Antananarivo during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicate that it had always been a cattle importer rather than an exporter. The density of population in Imerina prevented the use of land for pasturage and it accordingly supported very few cattle. There is thus a possibility that 'Himaire' did not in fact refer to the area we know today as 'Imerina' since there are many 'elevated regions' in central Madagascar. Le Case's information that Himaire was a cattle exporting area, after all, was based not upon personal observation but hearsay, and therefore may have been incorrect information. I assume in this work, however, that 'Himaire' did refer to Imerina. If it did not, it is possible that 'Imerina' itself is a newer toponym originating in the early nineteenth century as the Grandidières asserted.

34 Manuscript of Lebel provided to the directors of the London Missionary Society, no date (Lebel is known to have conducted this trip to Antananarivo in 1800): LMS/M/IL/1/1/B. See also Chardenoux, Untitled report on mission to Andrianampoinimerina in September–October 1807, no place, no date, ADC/FD/102/114v (emirne); Rondeaux to Decaen, no place, no date (1808): ADC/FD/101/251v (y mirne). It has been common among francophone Malgachisants to date the first use of the term Imerina to a manuscript prepared by Sylvain Roux in 1808. See the quotation by the Grandidières above in the text and F. Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, p. 33, n. 1.

Because the toponym Imerina is demonstrably older than the ethnonym Merina it can be postulated with reasonable surety – as the Grandidières seem to have correctly done in their footnote – that the term Merina entered into highland vocabulary through the place name Imerina. The derivation of ethnonyms from the names and characteristics of the homelands of their residents is a consistent and widespread Malagasy pattern and can be demonstrated through the following examples: Antanosy (people of the islands); Sakalava (long beach);<sup>35</sup> Antandroy (people of Androy); Antankarana (people of the Ankarana mountains); Antaifasy (people of the sand), and so on. It is not surprising in light of this common Malagasy pattern that the toponym Imerina was shortened to Merina in order to designate the people residing there.

My road to this simple conclusion, one made by the Grandidières without explanation or substantiation, is navigated through a phantasmagoric world of ethnonyms and toponyms. Imerina was not the only commonly employed term to designate central Madagascar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nor was any single ethnonym consistently utilized to designate the people residing there. It is precisely this befuddling terminological proliferation (not to mention confusion) that provides evidence for the inchoate, fluid nature of highland ethnic identity before the mid-nineteenth century. What the evidence demonstrates is that by the early nineteenth century the ethnonym Merina, although often employed to collectively designate the people of central Madagascar, was not truly an ethnic identity at all but a political one in the early stages of becoming ethnicized. I begin this archaeology of naming with an examination of ethnonyms and turn later to toponyms, which in central Madagascar are semantically related to ethnic names.

## Ethnonyms

The first recorded ethnonym employed to designate inhabitants of highland central Madagascar – Amboalambo (literally, 'wild dog-wild pig') – dates at least to the eighteenth century. It is commonly and implicitly assumed that the Amboalambo homeland was geographically coterminous with today's Imerina and that the term represented a premodern pan-highland ethnonym later substituted by the modern-day Merina. This is an oversimplification and obscures a fascinating cultural politics of identity at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Careful readings of extant documents reveal that according to highland usage, Amboalambo designated a restricted group of people living in central Madagascar by the eighteenth century. During the early eighteenth century, for example, a sailor who conversed with itinerant 'Amboalambo' traders in western Madagascar reported that they lived in a specific highland kingdom called 'Voalambo'.<sup>37</sup> Several decades later, in 1788, Jacques de Lasalle noted in an account of a voyage to the kingdom of Ambohimanga that its king Andrianampoinimerina ruled over 'a large province *neighbouring* the Ambo-

35 There is some disagreement about the meaning of the Sakalava ethnonym. See L. Sharp, *The Possessed and the Dispossessed: Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993), p. 57, whose informants told her it signified 'people of the long valleys'.

36 See P. Larson, 'Social Identity and the Collective Self in Precolonial Africa: Reflections on Early Merina Ethnogenesis in Highland Central Madagascar, 1775–1810', Paper presented at the 37th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association of the United States, Toronto, Canada, 3 November 1994.

37 There were multiple kingdoms in central Madagascar at this time. R. Drury, *Madagascar; or, Robert Drury's Journal, During Fifteen Years' Captivity on that Island, and a Further Description of Madagascar by the Abbe Alexis Rochon* (New York, 1969) [reprint of 1890 version of the 1728 original], p. 277. These terms were still employed at mid-century: see Rev. Hirst to Rev. Duncombe, H.M.S. Lenox, off Madagascar, 6 September 1759, printed in R. Drury, *Madagascar, or, Robert Drury's Journal*, p. 13.

lambes'.<sup>38</sup> During the nineteenth century, by contrast, Ambohimanga was considered the core homeland of the Merina people, and its ruler Andrianampoinimerina their collective king.

An entry for 'Ambolambe' (the Gallicized rendition of the Malagasy 'Amboalambo') in Barthélemy de Froberville's manuscript *Grand Dictionnaire de Madagascar* (ca. 1815) reads as follows:

Ambolambe. This insulting epithet was given by a king of the province of Ancove, also called 'of the hovas', [ 'Ancove' and 'hovas' designate highland central Madagascar and its residents, respectively, and will be discussed below] to the inhabitants of a small region of his kingdom who revolted against him. He made them return to the law and desired not to take any additional vengeance upon them; but he forbade upon very severe penalties that they be called by anything else [but Amboalambo] in the country. The new name prevailed in effect over their old one. But among Europeans the name [Amboalambo] serves without distinction to refer to all the inhabitants of the province of Ancove. It is an insult to designate them by such while at the same time trading with them.<sup>39</sup>

While de Froberville does not cite the precise source of his information (he never travelled into central Madagascar himself and worked primarily from manuscripts produced by francophone traders) several issues derive from it. First of all, his story suggests that Amboalambo originated as a name of ascription, in the first instance imposed by a highland king upon recalcitrant subjects and later employed by Europeans to designate all the inhabitants of the Malagasy highlands. It was not a term chosen and employed by the groups so named. Second, the story confirms the comment of de Lasalle (above) that according to highland usage, Amboalambo referred only to a restricted region of central Madagascar. Finally, de Froberville is miffed that francophone *traitants* would continue to name their highland trade partners by a culturally insulting term.

Given both its political history and its reference to two wild animals (dogs, *amboa*, and pigs, *lambo*) with negative, derogatory cultural associations, Amboalambo-as-ethnonym was repudiated by Malagasy highlanders.<sup>40</sup> Some European *traitants* and others with interest in the Madagascar trade<sup>41</sup> sympathized with the sensitivities of their highland merchant allies and in their writings after about 1810 consciously substituted the term Hova for Amboalambo.<sup>42</sup> Barthélemy de Froberville, for example, who at Mauritius edited the earliest known written account of travel into the highland interior of Madagascar<sup>43</sup> demonstrates this conscious rejection of the term Amboalambo. de Froberville wrote in explanation for his excision of Amboalambo from Mayeur's travelogue that

Throughout this account of the journey, Mayeur calls the Hova people by nothing other than Amboalambo. We have said elsewhere that this name, under which they [highlanders] have

38 J. de Lasalle, 'Mémoire sur Madagascar (1797)', *Notes, Reconnaissances, et Explorations*, 3 (1898), p. 577. French text. The emphasis is mine.

39 B. de Froberville, *Grand dictionnaire de Madagascar*, entry for Ambolambe, BL/MD/Add.Mss./18121/64r/44r. French text.

40 For an early confirmation of this fact see D. Griffiths, journal entry for 1 April 1822 in his journal for 18 January 1822 through 19 July 1822: LMS/J/M&M/1. Dogs are pests to the common people, scavenging for food, chasing passers by, biting indiscriminately, and symbolizing filth and desecration. Under Andrianampoinimerina pigs were prohibited (*fady*) at the royal court and even near Antananarivo, the capital. They were conceptualized as polluting, counteracting the sacred power of the royal talismans (*sampy*).

41 That facilitated colonization of Ile de France and Bourbon through deliveries of critical supplies of food and slave labor. See A. Toussaint, *Histoire des îles Mascareignes* (Paris, 1972).

42 Before the death of Andrianampoinimerina in 1810 the ethnonym Amboalambo does not seem to have come under attack, although it was being employed simultaneously with Hova, Ova and Ove.

43 Mayeur's voyage of 1777. Because Mayeur's is the first European voyage into Madagascar for which we have documentation, it is often mistakenly believed to have been the first. Mayeur indicates in this journal, however, that numerous francophone *traitants* had already traveled extensively in central Madagascar by 1777.

been known for a very long time (literally, dog-pig) is insulting; and that, better instructed, Mayeur substituted in his later writings the name Hova. I thought it right to substitute Hova for Amboalambo in this account too.<sup>44</sup>

In order to justify their selection of the ethnonym 'Hova/Ove' some traitants even suggested the term embodied an intrinsic, indigenous meaning, but it is clear that the gloss was a pure fabrication that appealed to racial taxonomies and the French conviction that somehow 'Oves' were more civilized than the rest of the Malagasy. Rondeaux informed the governor of Ile de France in 1808 that 'this people call themselves Ove, which signifies bronzed with long hair, a bellicose and entirely commercial nation, they claim descendance from whites'.<sup>45</sup> While during the late eighteenth century highlanders designated themselves by no single ethnonym, then, neighbouring Malagasy and Europeans called some of them Amboalambo while a successful movement was afoot among some francophone Madagascar partisans in the Indian Ocean (and notably Rondeaux and de Froberville) to replace the derogatory Amboalambo with the supposedly acceptable Hova.<sup>46</sup>

Originating in francophone naming of Madagascar's highlanders during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Hova-as-ethnonym achieved remarkable persistence in European lexicons. James Hastie, the British envoy to King Radama's government beginning in 1817 used it exclusively until his death in 1826, adopting the orthography 'Ova' and sometimes 'Ovah'.<sup>47</sup> Curiously, however, missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS), who first arrived in central Madagascar in 1820, never employed any ethnonym for the people of the highlands in their correspondence to the directors of the Society until 1829, when they commenced using 'Hova' and 'Ova' with a vengeance.<sup>48</sup> Until 1829 they scrupulously avoided ethnonyms by writing, for example, of 'the dialect of Imerina',<sup>49</sup> 'King Radama then chief of Imerina',<sup>50</sup> or 'the king and his subjects',<sup>51</sup> rather than of the 'Hova dialect', 'King Radama then chief of the Hovas', or 'the Hova and their king'. The probable reason for the LMS's abrupt adoption of Hova as an ethnonym was the collective completion toward the end of 1829 of key portions of a manuscript treating central Madagascar that was published nine years later by William Ellis as the famed *History of Madagascar*.<sup>52</sup> In the process of composing the manuscript, LMS missionaries must have determined to employ the francophone ethnonym (and the term used by their own diplomatic representative to Radama). In Ellis' hand, however, Hova became more than a mere ethnonym: he imbued it with a Victorian flair by describing the Hova as the 'olive-coloured race' of central

44 B. de Froberville, editor's note number 2, in N. Mayeur, 'Voyage dans le Sud et dans l'intérieur des terres et particulièrement au pays d'Hancove, Janvier 1777, Rédigé par Barthélemy de Froberville', *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, 12 (1913), p. 168. French text.

45 Rondeaux to Decaen, no place, no date (1808): ADC/FD/101/251v. As we will see below, Barthélemy de Froberville took this definition from Rondeaux and canonized it in his *Grand dictionnaire de Madagascar*.

46 Amboalambo was still being employed during the early nineteenth century but it soon disappeared. See J.B. Fressange, 'Voyage à Madagascar en 1802, 1803', *Annales des Voyages, de la Géographie et de l'Histoire*, 2 (1808), p. 23; and C.T. Hilsenberg and W. Bojer, 'A Sketch of the Province of Emerina', in *Botanical Miscellany* (London, 1833), p. 253.

47 Journal of J. Hastie, 14 November 1817 to 19 May 1818: MNA/HB/10/2. For later references, see Hastie's letters to Viret and Barry during 1825: MNA/HB/4.

48 For example: D. Jones to W.A. Hankey, Tananarive, 25 March 1829: LMS/M/IL/3/1/B; J. Cameron to W. Arundel, Tananarive, 25 September 1829: LMS/M/IL/3/2/B; E. Baker to W. Arundel, Tananarive, 26 September 1829: LMS/M/IL/3/2/B.

49 D. Jones and D. Griffiths to G. Burder, Tananarive, 30 July 1825: LMS/M/IL/2/2/B.

50 An Appeal to the Christian World, Madagascar Missionary School Society, D. Jones, D. Griffiths, J. Hastie, Tananarive, 14 November 1825: LMS/M/IL/2/2/C.

51 D. Jones and D. Griffiths to Directors, Tananarive, 24 June 1824: LMS/M/IL/2/1/B.

52 For information on the original production of this manuscript by LMS missionaries see: 'Prospectus of the History of the Protestant Mission', No Place, No Date: LMS/M/IL/3/2/A; Minutes from the Missionary Minute Book, Tananarive, 11 September 1829 through 1 March 1830: LMS/M/IL/3/3/A; J.J. Freeman to Rev. W. Orme, Port Louis (Mauritius), 14 June 1830: LMS/M/IL/3/3/B.

Madagascar, thus linking his definition back to the idea of a 'bronzed, straight-haired' people generated by French merchants in the late eighteenth century.<sup>53</sup>

Europeans of all nationalities continued to utilize Hova as a highland ethnonym well into the twentieth century. As late as 1885 a comprehensive Malagasy-English dictionary edited by James Richardson of the LMS defined Hova as 'The inhabitants of Imerina; the common people', while not even providing an entry for Merina.<sup>54</sup> Both LMS missionaries and missionaries of the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) employed Hova in their correspondence during the late nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Anglophone and Francophone publications used Hova extensively as an ethnonym too.<sup>56</sup> Even the United States Library of Congress continues to employ 'Merina' and 'Hova' interchangeably in its most recent subject classification index!<sup>57</sup> By contrast the most recent dictionary of the Malagasy language (Merina dialect) contains no entry for Hova whatsoever.<sup>58</sup>

Commonly utilized during the nineteenth century by Europeans and sometimes by Malagasy composing diplomatic correspondence in European languages,<sup>59</sup> Hova was in fact a misnomer, a mistaken ethnonym. Hova is a social status in the ranked social system of central Madagascar that includes Andriana (highest rank), Hova (middle rank) and Andevo or Mainty (lowest rank). The majority of highland Malagasy belonged to the Hova status and this is undoubtedly the reason that Europeans so easily extended the term to the population as a whole, discovering, as they did, that highlanders employed no common ethnonym of their own. Foreigners' invention of an ethnonym for highland Malagasy – but especially their choice of the status group designation for the numerical majority of central Madagascar's people – constitutes the single most cogent evidence that a collective ethnic identity under any name did not exist in central Madagascar until the nineteenth century. Malagasy language texts of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, never use Hova as an ethnonym but employ it only in its specific social meaning when referring to the Hova status group in contrast to the Andriana and the Mainty.<sup>60</sup> It is reported that Queen Ranaivalona I tore to shreds an unread letter from a French marine captain in 1837 because it was addressed, offensively and incorrectly, to 'the Queen of the Hovas'.<sup>61</sup> It is a tribute to the resilient identity of Madagascar's highland peoples that misguided European naming – desultory efforts to define a 'tribe' over the period of nearly two centuries – never took

53 W. Ellis, *History of Madagascar, Comprising also The Progress of the Christian Mission Established in 1818; and an Authentic Account of the Persecution and Recent Martyrdom of the Native Christians* (London, 1838), I, p. 121.

54 J. Richardson, *A New Malagasy-English Dictionary*, entry for Hova, p. 283; an entry for Merina is missing from p. 438 where it would have been placed if included. Merina is also absent as an entry in Abinal and Malzac's Malagasy-French dictionary: Abinal et V. Malzac, *Dictionnaire Malgache-Français* (Tananarive, 1888), p. 441.

55 'Hovaregjeringen', M. Borgen til Hovedbestyrelsen, Sirabe, 6 Januar 1870: NMS/S/HA/132/3; L. Dahle til Hovedbestyrelsen, Antananarivo, 14 Mai 1872: NMS/S/HA/132/9; 'Hovaerne' J. Johnsen til Hovedbestyrelsen, Vohibe, 17 November 1893: NMS/S/HA/140A/11. For LMS usage see virtually any incoming letter from missionaries in Madagascar after 1870 in LMS/M/IL.

56 Some Examples: L. McLeod, *Madagascar and its People* (New York, 1969 [originally published in 1865]); J. Sibree, *Madagascar and its People: Notes of Four Year's Residence* (London, 1870); J.-B. Piolet, *Madagascar et les hovas: description, organisation, histoire* (Paris, 1895); A. and G. Grandidier, *Ethnographie de Madagascar: Volume IV, Tome Troisième* (Paris, 1917); V. Malzac, *Histoire du royaume hova depuis ses origines jusqu'à sa fin* (Tananarive, 1930).

57 Library of Congress, *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, 16th edn (Washington, D.C., 1993), Vol. II, p. 2223; Vol. III, pp. 2859, 2878.

58 R. Rajemisa-Raolison (ed), *Rakibolana Malagasy* (Fianarantsoa, 1985), p. 447. This is a mystery, for 'hova' is a central word both in contemporary society and in Malagasy history, both Merina and Betsileo.

59 Raombana, *Histoires* (Fianarantsoa, 1980) who, educated in England and writing in English during the 1850s, frequently wrote of 'the Hovas or people of Imerina' (see pp. 34, 552, 554ff). Page numbers refer to the original manuscript.

60 Some examples from the *Tantara*: pp. 154, 156, 158, 303, 321, 353, 633, 687, 718, 784, 790, 994–995.

61 Reported in F. Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, p. 33, n. 1.

root in local cultural vocabularies. Nineteenth-century European ethnic classifications fell upon unwilling native ears.

## Toponyms

Toponyms for the highland area now commonly known as Imerina present a similarly intricate history. Although Imerina (the toponym) is of demonstrated antiquity, Europeans introduced a second set of toponyms for the area, terms directly related to their naming highlanders Hova: Ankova, Ankove, Hova and Hovah. The convention of calling the interior land of the Hovas Ankova (and sometimes Hancove, Ancove, Ove, Ova, Ovah) also dates to the francophone merchant community of the late eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup> The most likely explanation for why Europeans extensively employed the term Ancova rather than Imerina to refer to the Malagasy highlands is that Imerina was indeed an area in the highlands, but a very restricted one indicating only the surroundings of Antananarivo until late in the reign of Andrianampoinimerina. Consider, for example, the political geography of one Weber, a merchant from Ile de France who travelled in the Malagasy interior around the turn of the nineteenth century and noted that Andrianampoinimerina was 'souverain du pais d'ancove et d'emir' (sovereign of the country of Ancova *and* Imerina).<sup>63</sup> In his manuscript *Grand dictionnaire de Madagascar* completed shortly after 1810 Barthelemy de Froberville provides the following entry for Imerina, under the orthography 'Imirn':

Imirn. Mr Rondeaux is the only one of the ancient and modern voyagers who calls by this name the province of Ancove, inhabited by the Oves, or Ovas, which he says signifies a people of bronze skin (*basané*) with long hair [i.e. straight]. Flaccourt mentions this province under the name of Alfissach or 'land of the grape vines', and the moderns by Ancove or land of the Ambolambes.<sup>64</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century, then, toponyms derived from Ankova virtually supplanted Imerina in European usage, while Flaccourt's mid-seventeenth century toponym of 'Alfissach' was never employed.

The francophone naming convention was also adopted by LMS missionaries during the early nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup> Although it insinuated itself into common European and diplomatic vocabularies, Ancova/Hova never entirely displaced the existing indigenous term Imerina. In one of his official proclamations, undoubtedly composed by his French secretary Robin, King Radama (1810–1828) employed the toponym Imerina,<sup>66</sup> while Rateffy, one of Radama's foremost protégés and governor of the eastern provinces of the empire, used both

62 See N. Mayeur, 'Voyage dans le Sud.'

63 Weber (négociant de l'Isle de France, voyageur à l'isle de Madagascar) to mon Général, no place, 30 floréal an 7 (19 May 1799): ADC/FD/101/182v. The dating of this letter is problematic. Presumably the General to whom the letter was addressed was Decaen, since it is among his papers, but Decaen first arrived at Ile de France in 1803 and the collection of his documents relating to Madagascar mostly cover the years 1807 and 1808. At a later date traitants began to equate Ancova and Imerina. See Rondeaux to Decaen, no place, no date (1808); ADC/FD/101/251v (la grande province d'ancove ou y mirne dont Dianampoëen est le souverain absolu).

64 B. de Froberville, *Grand dictionnaire de Madagascar*, BL/MD/Add.Mss./18121/170r/440r, entry for Imirn. French text.

65 For example: 'our journey to Ova,' entry for 13 September 1820 in D. Jones, Journal, 4 September through 14 October 1820: LMS/J/M&M/I (and several subsequent usages in the same document).

66 'La province d'Imerina.' From: 'A True Copy of His Majesty's proclamation sent to the Directors of the London Missionary Society by David Jones at the request of all the brethren, and as it was drawn from the original made by the King,' Tananarive, 29 April 1823: LMS/M/IL/1/4/C.

Imerina and Ovah.<sup>67</sup> British Missionaries and diplomats too might write Ancova one time and Imerina the next.<sup>68</sup>

In 1838 William Ellis (or the LMS missionaries who composed the *History of Madagascar* manuscript) attempted to bring systematic and separate meanings to the two toponyms:

Ankova is a compound word, formed of Any and Hova. Any is an adverb of place, signifying there, and a preposition signifying at. In composition, the final y is dropped. Hova is the name of the people. It is sometimes spelt without the h, as Ova; but more correctly with the h, breathed very softly. It is changed into k, in composition, after n, gratia euphoniae, An-kova – there, at the place of the Hovas, the country of the Hovas.<sup>69</sup>

Ankova is divided into three chief parts or divisions; viz. Imerina, Imamo, and Vonizongo. Imerina gave name originally to the kingdom of Radama, and hence he has sometimes been spoken as the prince of Imerina, chieftain of Emerne, king of the Hovas, &c. Imamo and Vonizongo, were annexed to the district of Imerina during the reign of the father of Radama, and have ever since composed the kingdom of Ankova.<sup>70</sup>

By claiming that Ankova represented the entire, expanded region of Radama's kingdom and Imerina only its original homeland, the LMS generated a specific definition of Ancova that was employed by foreigners for several decades, until missionary linguists sensitive to local Malagasy usage pushed for scrapping the term Ancova altogether. The context for this change was the effort in 1872 to rename the 'Ankova District Committee' of the LMS to the 'Imerina District Committee'.

We wish the name of the Committee changed from Ankova to Imerina. The common use of the word Ankova for Imerina has no doubt arisen from the statement contained in the *History of Madagascar* vol. 1 pp. 82 & 83. Ankova is used of the country of the Hovas, but not by themselves. The other tribes often use the word, but the Hovas use Imerina. We hesitated for a time as to the desirability of using the latter name in preference to the former, lest we should seem to restrict within too narrow limits the district under our care. The name Imerina was formerly used in a more restricted sense, as excluding Imamo & Vonizongo; but at the present day it has a far wider application and includes the whole of this central province occupied by the Hovas. In future, therefore, we prefer using the better known and more correct name, and that the name of the Committee is henceforth changed to Imerina District Committee.<sup>71</sup>

From 1872 the term Ancova disappeared abruptly from all LMS correspondence, and henceforth British missionaries and other Europeans employed Imerina exclusively.<sup>72</sup> These changes once again highlight the persistence of indigenous categories and the ineffectiveness of foreigners, influential at the royal court though they were,<sup>73</sup> to significantly reorient local naming practices.

67 'Imerina': Rateffy to C. Colville, Ambatoaranana, 28 August 1828: MNA/HB/20/4; 'Ovah': Rateffy and Rabodosahondra to Unknown, Tamatave, 13 September 1828: MNA/HB/20/5.

68 Examples of LMS and British diplomatic use of Imerina: J. Jeffreys to the Board of Directors of the LMS, Tananarive, 26 May 1823: LMS/M/IL/1/5/B (orthography: Emerina); Continuation of Mr Lyall's Journal, from the 24 March 1829: MNA/HB/19/25/10v; R. Lyall to C. Colville, Bois Chéri (Mauritius), 28 July 1829: MNA/HB/20/19/1v; J.J. Freeman to G.F. Dick, Port Louis (Mauritius), 24 November 1835: MNA/HB/9/43/1r.

69 W. Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, I, p. 82.

70 W. Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, I, p. 83.

71 W.E. Cousins to Rev. Dr Mullens, Antananarivo, 5 November 1872: LMS/M/IL/ 10/3/C.

72 Examples from NMS correspondence: H. Wilhelmsen til Hovedbestyrelsen, Soavina, 18 August 1873: NMS/S/HA/133/2; J. Engh til Hovedbestyrelsen, Betafo, 18 August 1875: NMS/S/HA/133/8; Th. Rosaas til Hovedbestyrelsen, Sirabe, 7 Januar 1882: NMS/S/HA/135B/8.

73 See B. Gow, *Madagascar and the Protestant Impact* (London, 1979).

## Highland Malagasy Historical Sources: Elements of a Resolution

If European texts and diplomatic materials produced by the highland government for the consumption of foreigners project a plethora of inconsistent, contradictory, and often incorrect toponyms and ethnonyms, the picture is altogether different when we consult Malagasy language texts of the nineteenth century. Malagasy texts produced in central Madagascar are consistent in their use of Imerina as a toponym. Ancova never appears in these nineteenth century materials.<sup>74</sup> Neither, as noted earlier, do Malagasy texts ever use Hova as a highland ethnonym. Rather, it is precisely in Malagasy texts of the mid-nineteenth century that we find the first documentable uses of Merina as an ethnonym.

Because the Malagasy texts I analyze here have been implicitly assumed to constitute evidence of an enduring Merina ethnic identity (one I am arguing was merely inchoate at 1820), I must enter into some grammatical detail before proceeding. Assumptions of an enduring Merina ethnicity based upon Malagasy texts result from three fundamental errors: in grammar/orthography, in translation, and in historical method. First, because in Malagasy written texts the toponym Merina often stands alone – i.e. neither physically attached to another word nor prefixed by the customary 'i' that marks place (as in *ary ny laza hoe velona Radama II dia nitombo tety Merina ka maro ny olona no efa nanantena hampanjaka and'Radama II*)<sup>75</sup> – it appears that the word without its preceding 'i' was in widespread oral use (which is not the case). The confusion arises from how nineteenth century orthography represented the spoken language. In this particular passage, the words 'tety Merina' would in today's orthography be spelled 'tety Imerina', not because the old toponym Merina is now arbitrarily changed to Imerina but because in the old orthography the sound 'i' (always placed before merina in spoken Malagasy when referring to a place) was assumed to reside in the final 'y' of 'tety' and hence did not need to be duplicated at the beginning of merina.<sup>76</sup>

In any case, in the spoken dialect of central Madagascar a speaker seldom accentuates a double pronunciation of 'i' sounds between words (as in *tety Imerina*) and this is the reason that the old orthography left only one 'i' sound there, and did not place a now orthographically 'proper', second 'i' in front of merina. When the toponym was said as a single word, of course (but naturally it normally appeared in a sentence or phrase), the 'i' sound always preceded 'merina'. Ambiguity in Malagasy texts resulting from a problematic orthography for representing the spoken language, then, produced multiple 'Merinas' (toponyms) standing alone in a written sentence<sup>77</sup> and thus, through uncaredful readings of historical documents, served to perpetuate the myth of an enduring, named Merina ethnic identity.

Second, mistranslations of names such as that of the founder king of the highland kingdom, Andrianampoinimerina, or very ancient kings in highland king lists,<sup>78</sup> supported the idea that Merina was formerly used as an ethnonym. Common translations of Andrianampoinimerina, for example, read 'sovereign in the hearts of the Merina' (disaggre-

74 This includes such diverse materials as the Archives of the Merina kingdom, the *Tantara*, Rainandriamampandry's *Tantarany Madagascar*, and various other manuscripts such as the manuscript of 'Ranavalona's Ombiasy': published as *Le manuscrit de l'ombiasy de Ranavalona* (Fianarantsoa, Documents Historiques de Madagascar, N. 33–38, no date) (the manuscript itself dates to between 1866 and 1870).

75 *Manuscrit de l'ombiasy*, p. 333. Emphasis is mine. Translation: 'and the saying that Radama II was alive grew here in Imerina (*tety Merina*) so that many people hoped to make Radama II king.'

76 In Malagasy the letters 'i' and 'y' represent the same sound but i's are always changed to y's when ending a word.

77 As in the Malagasy example provided in the text of the previous paragraph.

78 Such as those reproduced in *Tantara*, pp. 8–12.

gated in Malagasy:<sup>79</sup> *andriana am-poin'ny Merina*).<sup>80</sup> Yet this translation is questionable, short of any independent evidence that Merina was employed as an ethnonym before the nineteenth century (of which there is none). Rather, the name Andrianampoinimerina must properly be translated as 'sovereign in the heart of Imerina' (disaggregated in Malagasy: *andriana am-poin'Imerina*), a meaning that – gathering from nineteenth century texts – was Andrianampoinimerina's intent.<sup>81</sup>

Third, it is commonly overlooked that the *Tantara*, the enormous compendium of narrative traditions relating to the founding of the Merina kingdom and to the ancient ancestors of Andrianampoinimerina, was written only during the mid-nineteenth century – some 60 years after the death of Andrianampoinimerina and centuries after the reign of presumed ancient Merina kings.<sup>82</sup> Because *Tantara* texts do at points employ Merina as an ethnonym (more about this below), it is uncarefully (and usually implicitly rather than explicitly) assumed that such usage must be of great antiquity rather than in fact only a confirmation of common usage at the time of the documents' commitment to writing during the late 1860s and early 1870s. This unfortunate tendency is an extension of the practice, common in the historiography of central Madagascar, to simplistically consider narrative traditions such as the *Tantara* as constituting true and factually accurate records of the past rather than as interested political mythology that require careful exegesis and interpretation.<sup>83</sup> It is highly probable, for example, that the word 'merina' was retroactively appended to the names of highland kings in the ubiquitous king lists of the mid nineteenth century and that, more specifically, Andrianampoinimerina's name expanded posthumously or shortly before his death from Andrianampoina to Andrianampoinimerina. This is suggested by the fact that all historical documents contemporaneous with the famous king and written by people who met and dealt with him face to face, omit the final 'merina' from his name, calling him simply Andrianampoina. This was true even in 1807, only three years before the illustrious sovereign died.<sup>84</sup>

Most of the references to 'Merina' in Malagasy texts of the mid-nineteenth century, then, are either toponyms (i.e. old orthography for Imerina) or have otherwise been misinterpreted as evidence that the word is being employed in the text as an ethnonym. There are, on the other hand, some instances in which Merina is clearly meant as an

79 Malagasy personal and place names, which sometimes run more than ten syllables, are normally concatenations of several words.

80 It should be noted that this particular translation error is seldom made in printed works.

81 There is no plural marker for Malagasy nouns, and Malagasy speakers use the word 'heart' (*fo*), like English speakers, in both figurative and geographical senses. Thus the translations 'sovereign in the hearts of the Merina' and 'sovereign in the heart of Imerina' are – technically – equally valid.

82 See P. Larson, 'Multiple Narratives, Gendered Voices: Remembering the Past in Highland Central Madagascar', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 28,2 (1995), pp. 295–325.

83 This is true of most histories of the Merina kingdom. For influential examples see V. Malzac, *Histoire du royaume hova*; E. Ralaimihoatra, *Histoire de Madagascar*; R.W. Rabemananjara, *Madagascar, histoire de la nation malgache* (Paris, 1952); H. Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar* (Paris, 1960); Prou, *Malagasy un pas de plus*. The only monograph-length critical study of the *Tantara*, which is nevertheless stronger in textual than historical criticism, is A. Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina*.

84 Examples: N. Mayeur, 'Voyage au pays d'Ancove (1785) par M. Mayeur, Rédaction de M. Dumaine', *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, 12 (1913), p. 34 (Diananpouine); Weber to Général Decaen, no place, 30 floréal an 7 (19 May 1799): ADC/FD/101/182v (dian-ampoin); N. Mayeur, 'Mémoire historique, politique et commercial sur les parties de l'isle de Madagascar qui me sont connues, pour servir de base aux projets que le gouvernement français peut former dans cette grande isle pour des établissements fixes, tant agricoles que commerciaux,' Trois Îlots, Canton de Flacq (Ile de France), 1re novembre 1807: ADC/FD/101/57v (Dieu = Empouine); Chardenoux to Decaen, Untitled report on travel into interior of Madagascar in 1807, no place, no date: ADC/FD/102/113r (Dianampoin); Rondeaux to Decaen, no place, no date (1808): ADC/FD/101/251v-252v (Dianampoëen). An obvious argument against this theory is that Europeans found the king's long name too long and daunting and simply shortened it in their writings. The wide range of Malagasy language fluent and culturally knowledgeable writers who used the shortened form militate against this objection.

ethnonym.<sup>85</sup> References in nineteenth-century documents to Merina as a group name conform to a uniform pattern: they are used in rhetoric or oratory and refer to the entire, collective highland population rather than to some subset of it, as when the king addresses his subjects in assembly crying, 'you Merina' or 'O (you) Merina'. Never do the texts employ Merina as a label for naming the ethnic identity of a restricted group of highland individuals, such as, for example, in 'Three Merina boys met two Merina girls'. This restricted semantic field of the word Merina suggests that the ethnonym first emerged as a political identity designating subjects of king Andrianampoinimerina and his successors rather than as a more fully developed ethnic consciousness in the sense that it is meant today.

Evidence of being Merina as a political identity additionally derives from a second type of usage found in Malagasy documents such as the *Tantara*: the term 'Merinalavasofina' (Merina of the long ears, or simply long-eared Merina).<sup>86</sup> Merinalavasofina appears in these texts as a term of ascription that Betsileo south of the central highlands used to designate their neighbours to the north,<sup>87</sup> and indeed the term only enters the texts when uttered in conversation by Betsileo characters. Together, Malagasy textual references to Merina and Merinalavasofina provide evidence that an 'ethnonym,' a named ethnic identity that would eventually mature and predominate in central Madagascar, existed at mid-century primarily as a political identity designating members of the highland ('Merina') kingdom.

Although Merina is used from time to time in Malagasy texts of the mid-nineteenth century, it is not the most commonly employed ethnonym in those texts. Two other terms, 'Ambanilanitra' ([people] beneath the heavens) and 'Ambaniandro' ([people] beneath the day) come in with several times the number of references to Merina, especially in the *Tantara*.<sup>88</sup> Both of these additional 'ethnonyms' are generic terms for 'citizens' and are common expressions in Malagasy dialects for designating large numbers of people.<sup>89</sup> It has never been highland usage, for example, to say, 'I saw ten Ambanilanitra the other day'. Ambaniandro, on the other hand, did assume a life of its own: it was the term by which people from highland Madagascar were usually called in the conquered provinces and by which Merina outside of central Madagascar are called by local people across the island today (i.e. it is an ethnonym of 'ascription by others' outside of the Malagasy highlands).<sup>90</sup> In *Tantara* texts Merina and Ambaniandro/Ambanilanitra are often combined, or linked together, as in 'i Merinambaninandro' (290), 'ray Merina ambaniandro' (297), 'ry Merinambanilanitra' (693, 705). The common usage of two joined 'ethnonyms' is explained in

85 Examples from the *Tantara* (among others): p. 298: Mandehana re Merina (Go, you Merina); p. 299: Izany no ambara'ko amy nareo, ry Merina (This is what I reveal to you, O Merina); p. 310: Mandre va hianareo, ley Merina? (Do you hear, O Merina?); p. 709: Izaon'ny angaroa'ko volo anareo ry Merina (This is how I mix your hairs, you Merina).

86 *Tantara*, pp. 614, 618, 620, 621. This undoubtedly refers to the widespread highland practice, discontinued during the first decades of the nineteenth century, of puncturing and elongating ear lobes and decorating them with silver rings.

87 *Tantara*, pp. 614–615: Fa izany no fiantsoany ny Betsileo any Merina teo aloha.

88 A perusal of any of king Andrianampoinimerina's speeches, where most of the Merina ethnonym references are found, reveals that Ambaniandro and Ambanilanitra are used with much greater frequency but in the same manner as Merina, i.e. only in rhetorical, oratorical reference to highland people as a collectivity, such as 'Fa tsy 'zay ry ambanilanitra?' (Isn't that the case, O you Ambanilanitra?): *Tantara*, p. 291. For an example of a typical lengthy speech by Andrianampoinimerina in which ethnonyms are employed in the manner described above, see *Tantara*, pp. 705–717.

89 Both terms for highlanders are akin to the ethnonym used by the Merina to refer to the Betsileo ethnic group south of them: Betsileoerantaniandranitra (translated and disaggregated in English: 'Betsileo of the entire land and sky,') i.e. all Betsileo. *Tantara*, pp. 311, 615, 620.

90 For example, NMS missionaries in the Vakinankaratra of the southwestern highlands during the second half of the nineteenth century frequently referred to highlanders as Ambaniandro: L. Dahle til Hovedbestyrelsen, Antananarivo, 16. Oktober 1877: NMS/S/HA/134/8.

a passage of the *Tantara* that interprets such constructions as meaning the ‘government’ or ‘kingdom’ of a ruler rather than an ethnic consciousness: ‘the high place beneath the day [*i Merin’ambaniandro*] was the name of his kingdom/government’.<sup>91</sup> Rather than detracting from the conclusion of Merina as political identity, then, Ambanilanitra and Ambaniandro support the inference that terms (improperly called ethnonyms) used to designate highlanders in the early nineteenth century were primarily names signifying political identities and affiliations. The transformation of being Merina from political to ethnic identity, a key theme of highland culture history in the nineteenth century, was only begun by the early nineteenth century.

Being Merina, then, was not only a new identity in the early nineteenth century, it was first and foremost a political one. As a later-used ethnonym, Merina masks the political nature of early highland identity, and uncritically employed for the early nineteenth century and before it incorrectly suggests a full-blown ethnic consciousness. As I demonstrate elsewhere, the history of Merina ethnogenesis was a complex process in which people, drawn together into a kingdom and sharing the political identity conferred by it, employed that identity and their resulting ‘citizenship’ with the rights and responsibilities it entailed to generate an ethnic consciousness. Making the people of highland Madagascar politically ‘Merina’ represented a personal victory for Andrianampoinimerina and his successors; becoming ethnically ‘Merina’, on the other hand, was largely the work of Imerina’s rural communities as they appropriated political identity as a cultural resource and transformed it into an ethnic consciousness.<sup>92</sup> Merina ethnic identity was in the process of being made, inchoate and tentative at mid-century, despite the emergence of the term Merina early in the process.

### **Semantic Fields and Names of Identity: Suggestions for Critically Rethinking African Identity Histories**

Merina identity history raises important issues that humanists and social scientists of ethnicity need to explore more carefully. Ethnic identities rarely come full-blown, they are made, often from the building blocks of named, pre-existing identities. The nature of named identities shifts over time. While ethnic names might originally have been chosen by corporate groups or imputed upon them for the specific meanings (cultural, political, social) that they evoked, over time old names bear no necessary relationship to the mutating identities they continue to designate. Shallowly read, then, identity names are empty vessels designating bounded and classified sets of people in local cultural taxonomies yet offering few immediate clues to the nature of the collective consciousness they contain. The signifier is of less social and historical significance than the signified. Simply identifying when and how a named social identity emerged in the first place tells us little about the collective consciousness it designates or about its subsequent transformations.

‘Ethnonyms’, therefore, are not always ethnonyms. They may designate full-blown identities, nascent ones or even point to identities of an altogether different nature. One means of surmounting the difficulties of imprecision posed by identity names is to explore the constellation of meanings evoked by so-called ethnonyms and to analyze the precise contexts in which the terms were invoked and deployed in local languages and symbolic systems. By investigating the semantic fields of identity names we identify subtle and significant shifts in meaning. Modifications in the semantic fields of such names can assist

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91 *Tantara*, p. 147: *i Merin’ambaniandro no anarany ny fanjaka’ny*.

92 P. Larson, *Identities of a Crisis*.

us to discern multiple actors who participate in the politics of African identity and their reasons for doing so.

Are not processes of power and politics more fundamental than semantic fields to deciphering collective identity histories? Carolyn Hamilton and John Wright have articulately and appropriately opined the dangers of separating power and politics from our studies of ethnogenesis and ethnic naming.<sup>93</sup> Yet neither ought we to collapse the critical and useful distinctions among varying forms of collective consciousness. Power disparities characterize all identities, but all identities are not equivalent. The type of identity being deployed can significantly influence the politics and practices of power necessary to make it successful. The fact that the meaning of identity signifiers constantly shifts raises the simple but all too often ignored question of what ethnic identity actually is and when a shifting identity crosses the border into a consciousness that we can confidently label as ethnic. Historians are unlikely to come to agreement on this issue, not least because borders of identity are never neatly drawn and ethnicity is an elusive abstraction to define with precision or in a universally applicable manner. Yet we must become more explicit in our definitions and our methodologies than we currently are. What, for example, really differentiates Merina political consciousness from Merina ethnic consciousness?

Consciousness itself derives from the cognitive capacity of humans to reflect on themselves, their behaviour, and their relationship to other humans and their environment. Collective consciousness therefore becomes a sort of corporate self-concept as the group's reflection is moulded and articulated from within and without, ever in an interested fashion. The content and character of consciousness within what Bill Bravman calls 'communities of belonging'<sup>94</sup> are neither unproblematically ascertained nor neatly differentiated along political, ethnic, religious, social, clan or national lines. Ethnic belonging (ethnicity), however, normally entails a purposeful, interested collective consciousness of common descent and kinship, a claim to 'natural' belonging on the basis of certain linguistic, cultural or physical characteristics, or even on a set of attitudes and behaviours. A political consciousness (i.e. that which designates the sense of belonging to a polity) may express itself through a similar set of articulating institutions – such as through collective ritual, versions of corporate history, visual and verbal imagery, or clothing – and is similarly imagined and moralized, but its referent identity should not be analytically equated with ethnicity. Political identities channel loyalty toward administrative communities; ethnic identities toward communities of imagined kinship that assume a certain independence from formal structures of power and politics. When political identities successfully draw diverse peoples into a synthesized cultural/symbolic system they tend to generate an emergent ethnic or national consciousness.

While communities of belonging are relevant to the everyday lives of their members, whether scholars characterize that 'belonging' as ethnic or political might seem of little import. Yet the attempt to discern differences and shifts in the nature of belonging is relevant because the obligations and responsibilities of belonging change as the type of belonging itself shifts, hence influencing the social relationships people entertain, expect, or can mobilize. Unless we know the social ramifications of a particular collective identity and thus its particular architecture of power and obligation we fail to accurately identify the constellation of social relationships that social actors can invoke or by which they can be influenced. The problem is that while the identities they serve to reinforce may differ

93 C. Hamilton and J. Wright, 'The Making of the *AmaLala*: Ethnicity, Ideology and Relations of Subordination in a Precolonial Context', *South African Historical Journal*, 22 (1990), p. 14.

94 B. Bravman, 'Cultural Politics, Communities of Belonging, and Taita Ethnicity: Local Societies in the 19th Century,' paper presented at the 37th annual meeting of the African Studies Association of the United States, Toronto, Canada, 3 November 1994.

significantly, the symbols and rituals of enacting those differently natured identities may look deceptively similar. Consider, for example, Zulu age-sets or, in the case of central Madagascar, public rituals of allegiance to the royal court such as the famed *milefon-omby* and *misotro vokaka*, by which regional chiefs and communities swore allegiance to Andrianampoinimerina.<sup>95</sup> When were such practices and structures deployed to reinforce political loyalties and how might they have emerged as practices of ethnicity?

Answering these questions requires re-combing carefully through historical sources. My purpose here is to raise them as a significant problem in doing identity histories. What can be said with confidence is that like Merina ethnicity examined here, Zulu ethnicity and its alter-ethnicities did not originate as full-blown ethnic consciousnesses but developed within named political categories of people who were differentially incorporated into or excluded from Shaka's expanding kingdom.<sup>96</sup> It is likely, in fact, that many precolonial ethnicities stemming from processes of state formation – because corporate groups were first defined by their relationship to the centre of the polity – were transformed into ethnic consciousnesses from previously political ones. Investigating the semantic fields of 'names of belonging' is the single most effective tool for determining such qualitative identity shifts.

Finally, the Merina case demonstrates that ethnic identity can be created and transformed outside of a colonial context. Ethnogenesis is not simply a function of colonial rule. The recent tendency of historians to attribute the entire phenomenon of ethnicity itself to the twentieth century and to the unique intellectual and political/economic forces of imperialism and colonialism must be challenged by new scholarship. The power of colonial states to name and to categorize – to create tribes – must be balanced with studies that demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Europeans in precolonial contexts at simply pushing names and identities onto Africans. Some scholars are now extending the study of ethnicity and ethnic transformations far into Africa's precolonial past.<sup>97</sup> At the same time we must make our studies of colonial identities more subtle by rethinking claims that Europeans simply moulded or directed African communities of belonging at will. Careful 'readings' of African names of belonging will play a pivotal role in all of these projects.

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95 For example, *Tantara*, pp. 526–527.

96 Here I read Hamilton and Wright, 'The Making of the *AmaLala*' against the grain of the authors' conclusion that the *AmaLala* were created as an ethnic group through Shaka's act of naming them and the apparent (public) acceptance by their leaders of that name.

97 R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda before 1800* (Philadelphia, 1994); P. Larson, 'Social Identity and the Collective Self in Precolonial Africa'; C. Hamilton and J. Wright, 'The Making of the *AmaLala*'; T. Spear, 'Being 'Maasai', but not 'People of Cattle': Arusha Agricultural Maasai in the Nineteenth Century', in T. Spear and R. Waller, *Being Maasai*, pp. 120–136; J. Willis, 'The Makings of a Tribe'; J. Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda* (Oxford, 1992).